BOOK REVIEW

[*The Muslim World Book Review*, 36:3, 2016, pp. 20-25]

Seyyed Hossein Nasr et al., ed. *The Study Quran: A New Translation and Commentary*. New York: Harper Collins, 2015. Hardback. lix + 1988pp. Maps. ISBN: 978-0-06-112586-7.

This book is the magnum opus of Iranian University Professor of Islamic studies at George Washington University Seyyed Hossein Nasr (b. 1933), an expert on Islamic philosophy and the history of science and the heir apparent of the syncretist Frithjof Schuon (1907-1998) as head of the Maryamiyya Order, a universalist movement based on the so-called Traditionalist School. ("Traditionalism" is a Western adaptation of Hinduism that negates claims of Truth by any religion through relativizing all of them; I will refer to its ideology in this review by the term Perennialism.) It is a well-crafted, mostly North American project that lumps several works in a single hefty volume printed on extra-thin India paper: an original English rendering of the Qur'ān; a first-ever, rich anthology in English from 41 works of Quranic commentary with an embedded 42nd, original commentary on the part of Nasr, who terms it "not simply a collage of selections but a new work" (p. xliii); and the mismatched last part, 15 essays on the Qur'ān by a mixed group of academics—three of whom are also the book's general editors— "included… at the suggestion of the publisher… the essays are in a sense a separate book… an independent work" (p. xlv).

The earliest of the *tafsīr* sources used is Muqātil b. Sulaymān (d. 150/767), the next to latest Muḥammad Ḥusayn Ṭabāṭabā'ī (d. 1401/1981). Thirty-one of these sources are Sunni (74%), seven twelver-Shiʿi (17%), one (al-Shawkānī) Zaydi, one (al-Zamakhsharī) Muʿtazili, one (ʿAbd al-Razzāq al-Kāshānī) Batini and of course one (Nasr) Perennialist. Abbreviations pointing to each of those commentaries are used in almost all of the abundant footnotes and the editors explicitly identify the Shiʿi sources whenever using them, making Sunni sourcing the norm. Because of its coverage, the quality of its language, the range of its exegetical material and its attractive presentation, *The Study Quran* is the nearest thing to a handy and accessible, integral reference-work in English on the subject. This is not saying much. Nasr is, of all the Guénon Perennialists past and present, the nearest thing to a traditional scholar; but his field is not *Tafsīr*, not Hadith, not Arabic philology, and not jurisprudence.

Except for the calligraphied *basmala* that precedes each of the translated suras and a photograph from a palimpsest *muṣḥaf* on p. 1619 there is of course not one jot of Qur'ān in *The Study Quran*, which was entirely written by Nasr, his colleagues Caner K. Dagli, Maria Massi Dakake, Joseph E. Lumbard and the essayists. This banal yet unorthodox titular confusion between the original sacred Arabic corpus and the 2007-2016 collaborative product by the same name is kept throughout the 25-page introduction. The latter discusses "the inner unity of religions," the Christian doctrines of incarnation and transubstantiation, *jafr* and gematria (numerology), "polemical accounts in some apocryphal sources" of ʿAlī b. Abī Ṭālib's alternate Qur'ān, and bibliomancy or Quranic fortune-telling (see "Fāl-nāma" in the *Encyclopaedia Iranica*) which consists in opening a *muṣḥaf* at random before choosing a course of action instead of performing the actual *istikhāra* prayer taught by the Prophet, upon him blessings and peace.

Beyond a perfunctory captation on "the inimitable eloquence of Quranic Arabic, which Muslims consider a miracle that no human being can ever duplicate" (p. xlii) and a brief, unsourced footnote (2:23), *The Study Quran* shows no knowledge of *iʿjāz* or the miraculous inimitability of the Quranic idiom from the perspective of Muslim philologists and exegetes,

who viewed it as the foremost argument of divine origin and thus the central theme of exegesis. Ibn ʿĀshūr, one of the sources the *Study Quran* claims to have used, stated in the tenth prolegomenon to his *Tafsīr* (1:102): "A Quranic exegete is not reckoned to have passed muster as long as his commentary does not expose the aspects of eloquence in the verses it strives to explain, and the upshot of this inimitability is that the entire mission of the Prophet Muḥammad—upon him blessings and peace—was built on the staggering miracle (*muʿjiza*) of the Qur'ān, and that its conclusive proof (*ḥujja*) is inseparable from that miracle until the Day of resurrection."

Nasr protests that *The Study Quran* is to be "excluding modernistic or fundamentalist interpretations that have appeared in parts of the Islamic world during the past two centuries" (p. xl) hence the absence of the *tafsir* works of Abduh, Maududi, Qutb and Maraghi; but how is one to explain, on the one hand, the absence of contemporary non-modernistic or non-fundamentalist contributions such as by Drāz, Zuḥaylī, Bint al-Shāṭi' and Shinqīṭī and, on the other, the fact that the Perennialist ideology that pervades *The Study Quran* is itself very much a modernistic interpretation that has appeared in parts of the Western world during the past century? He justifies his choice of editors as "preserv[ing] diversity" because they are of both genders although all are, in his own words "from among those who had studied with me in one way or another in years past," for the sake of "preservation of the unity of the work." He asserts they are "all with direct experience of the Islamic world, familiarity with the traditional Islamic sciences, and mastery of classical Arabic" (pp. xl-xli). Although I do not know by what standards the latter claims are meant or under what recognized scholars of Qur'ān and Hadith any of the editors studied, Nasr included, nevertheless the translation problems on several key issues are obvious, not to mention the elephant in the room. Technical and doctrinal credentials matter in purporting to teach the ultimate source for the beliefs of two billion people in the third most widely spoken language on earth.

The Quranic translation of *The Study Quran* is unexceptional. Nasr adopts the same archaizing English typical of colonial India translators (and, most recently, Martin Lings) who wished to produce an equivalent of the King James Bible idiom, with "God" as the inevitable rendering of the divine Name and the similarly biblicized Englishing of the names of prophets, angels, places etc. *Janna* is translated not as the expected "paradise" but as the more literal "Garden" while *al-nār* is "the Fire" and *al-jaḥīm* "Hellfire." A few Arabicisms are imposed—the untranslated terms *ḥajj*, *ʿumra*, *jizya* (2:196-197, 9:3, 9:29, 22:27)—along with the diehard, archaic "wont" for *Sunna* and (in footnotes) the Trollopian "People of the Veranda" for *Ahl al-ṣuffa*. The unprecedented translation of *kursī* as pedestal (2:255) is felicitous but no such thought shows in rendering *dhālika al-kitāb* as "This is the Book" (2:2), when Rāzī and Bayḍāwī showed that the demonstrative of remoteness *dhālika* points to Quranic magnificence and unfathomability, and should therefore be rendered as "That." The translation of *lan nu'mina laka* as "we will not believe thee" (2:49) reduplicates the mistake of all previous English translations by ignoring the preposition *lām* (in *laka*), "for," which calls, as pointed out by Ṭabarī and others, for the rendering "we will not believe just for your sake/just because you say so."

The translation of *muslimūn* mostly as "submitters" (3:52, 3:64, 3:80, 11:14…) is justifiable, the latter construing the original as a nominal form, were it not for the editors' underlying Perennialist bias which strives to separate the historical acception of *islām* as "the religion revealed through the Prophet of Islam" from generic "submission to God in general." Hence the claim that "in the Quran Abraham and Jesus are also called muslim *in the sense of 'submitter'*" (p. xxix, my emphasis). In reality the religion of Islam is submission *sine qua non* and all prophets are called *Muslim* with a capital from the start—and in the sense of timeless, essential Muḥammadans, followers of the Prophet Muḥammad as explicited in verse 3:81—just as all Muslims are also submitters. In addition, submission is always understood

as submission to the latest prophet of the time, not to an earlier one, and so no submission remains today except that manifested in Islam. Al-Ghazālī cited in the book of *naskh* of his *Mustaṣfā* "the consensus in the agreement of the entire Community that the sacred law of Muḥammad—upon him blessings and peace—has abrogated the laws of his predecessors" while al-Nawawī in the book of *ridda* of his *Rawḍat al-ṭālibīn* stipulated, "Someone who does not believe that whoever follows another religion than Islam is an unbeliever, like the Christians, or has doubts about declaring them to be unbelievers, or considers their way to be correct, is himself a *kāfir* even if with that he professes Islam and believes in it."

The Perennialist leitmotiv of the universal validity of all religions is perhaps the chief original message of *The Study Quran* which readers will not get anywhere else, because it is as alien to the Qur'ān and Sunna as it is alien to Islam and all other religions. This novel theme creeps in and out unsourced; it is part of what the introduction innocuously describes as "providing in some places our own commentary, which is not found… in the earlier sources" (xliv), in comments such as "most Muslims believe that these women [Mary, Fāṭima and Āsiya] lead the soul [*sic*] of blessed women to Paradise" (p. 143) and "Some might argue, therefore, that Jesus, by virtue of being identified as God's *Word*, somehow participates (uniquely) in the Divine Creative Command" (p. 267). The latter co-Creator comment suffices to describe the effect of the *Study Quran* on the Perennialist School in the same terms Abū Muḥammad al-Tamīmī described the effect of Abu Yaʿlā al-Farrā's anthropomorphist book *Ibṭāl al-ta'wīlāt* on the Ḥanbalī School: "He has beshat them with filth even water cannot wash away" (Ibn al-Athīr, *al-Kāmil*, obituaries for the year 458).

The discussion of *ḥanīf* (2:135) mixes up Rāzī, Ṭabarī, Orientalist views and "universal truth," yielding an impossibly confused footnote. On pp. 31-32 the editors twist all the commentaries on verse 2:62 to make them fit into their very special reading of a single phrase in a controverted work of Ghazalī, *Fayṣal al-tafriqa*, in defense of their ideas. Their reduction of the Quranic condemnation of Christian doctrines as addressing only "a local sect of Christians with beliefs different from mainstream Chalcedonian Christianity" (p. 31), "those who assert the existence of three distinct gods" (p. 267), "certain sects among the Christians… such as the Jacobites and the Nestorians" (p. 316), is a revision of the Qur'ān and a woeful justification of Orthodox and Catholic Trinitarianisms. As pointed out by an earlier review [http://muslimmatters.org/2015/12/14/the-study-quran-a-review/], "in the formative period, Chalcedonian Christology was not being treated any differently than other forms of Christology, and the earliest Muslims regarded it as constituting the very Trinity which the Qur'ān rebukes." The comments from al-Rāzī to that effect cited on all the above pages show that the editors are fully aware of the fact.

This is what I called Nasr's embedded 42nd commentary and here are some more examples of it: "There may be a third possibility often left unexplored by Muslims until recently: that one can remain a Christian while affirming the veracity of the Prophet Muhammad and of what was revealed to him" (p. 187). This was in fact the claim made by the eighth-century founder of the ʿĪsāwiyya Perso-Jewish sect and pseudo-prophet Abū ʿĪsā al-Aṣfahānī (documented by Bāqillānī, Ibn Ḥazm and other heresiographers), namely that Jesus and Muḥammad were indeed prophets, but only for the Arabs. The spotlight is on what Lombard calls "the eternal *formless* truth" (p. 1766, my emphasis) but never on the abrogation and supercession of pre-Muḥammadan dispensations, to deny which is atheism and blasphemy, divestiture posing as inclusivism; as a result *The Study Quran* ends up construing the exact opposite of the message of the Qur'ān: "*The Religion of Truth* can be more broadly understood to mean all revealed religions" (p. 1367), a methodical rejection of the hadith in *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim*: "By the One in Whose hand is the soul of Muḥammad, there is no one among this nation, Jew or Christian, who hears of me and dies without believing in that with which I have been sent, but he will be one of the people of the Fire."

In the above context, the editorial comment "it is the Divine Will that there be multiple religious communities, as expressed in the next line of the verse *had God willed, He would have made you one community*" (p. 301), although true, is the stuff of heterodoxy (in this case Jabriyya determinism) and reveals a studied confusion between the divine will (*irāda*) and the divine good pleasure (*riḍā*). It is like an amoralist saying it is also the Divine Will that evil should exist.

This Perennialist bias thrives even at the expense of Arabic grammar and syntax. The translators correctly have "the Trustworthy Spirit" for *al-rūḥ al-amīn* (26:193) but render *rūḥ al-qudus* (16:102) as "the Holy Spirit"—rather than the accurate "Spirit of holiness"—construing *rūḥ* as a noun and *al-qudus* as an adjective then adding loaded initial capitals, a blatant christianism reminiscent of the now trite "God's baptism" for *ṣibghat Allāh* in 2:138 which this translation perpetuates. Arab Christian liturgies use *qudus* as an adjective exclusively, but the latter form is of course *al-rūḥ al-qudus*. Another poor choice is the limp rendering of *ittaqū* (beware) as "be mindful" (2:48, 2:123…) at times and "reverence" (2:189, 2:194, 49:12...) at others.

There are other serious problems of which again only a sampling can be given. In a long eight-column footnote at the beginning of the rendering of Sura 24 ("Light") the mainstream reader will notice an accumulation of scholarly fallacies posing as arguments against the criminal penalty of stoning for the adulterer. Among these, (i) avoidance of any mention of the Consensus which has formed over this issue since the first century of Islam; (ii) ignorance of the abrogated status—also by consensus—of the restriction of the adulterers' freedom to marry (pp. 868-869) and of the "double punishment" hadith (p. 866) for all but Hanbalis; the editors mechanically list *ḥadd* hadiths (pp. 865-866) without sourcing, grading or analysis, but only with a view to suggest ambiguity, conflict and contradiction over this particular issue, much in the same way that the entire book is ungrounded in jurisprudential *madhhab* knowledge; (iii) pointed mistranslation of the terms *al-shaykh wal-shaykha* in the abrogated Verse of Stoning, which here never meant "old man" and "old woman" as claimed ad nauseam, but rather "married man" and "married woman" in all the glosses. Sourcelessness is another way of purveying outlandish ideas, such as the unreferenced speculation (p. 436) by "some" that "the real crime of the people of Lot was forcible sodomy rather than consensual homosexual relations." This is an LGBT perspective that has nothing to do with scholarship of any kind, let alone exegesis. (See on this the excellent article "Gender Identity and Same-Sex Acts in Islamic Law" by MIT Muslim Chaplain and Fawakih Academic Dean Dr. Suheil Laher.) The insertion of elliptical dots between square brackets […] in the midst of verse 41:42 suggests lost parts or missing text in the original Arabic, a gross impropriety.

All the great exegetes agreed on *tafsīr* as requiring mastery in the entire spectrum of the Islamic disciplines. The methodology of *The Study Quran* falls short of that requirement even as it mimicks the activity of *tafsīr* and *ijtihād* in many places. In terms of presenting Islam to non-Muslims in an advantageous light in the post-9/11 world, it would have been a commendable effort that filled a void. However, the fact that it is, at best, mainstream in many places and absolutely heterodox in many others makes it unrecommendable in absolute terms. Those who are looking for a truly reliable holistic digest of the mercy-oriented, reason-grounded book of law, wisdom, prophets and devotion that is the Qur'ān in light of its native principles of mass transmission, consensus, abrogation, jurisprudence and the inexhaustible troves of divinely-inspired Arabic polysemy and Prophetic directives, must keep looking.

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